DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 394 283 FL 023 676

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TITLE	Bilingual Education: Focusing Policy on Student Achievement.
INSTITUTION	Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, Alexandria, VA.
PUB DATE	Mar 96
NOTE	10p.
AVAILABLE FROM	Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development; 1250 North Pitt Street, Alexandria, VA 22314 (Stock No. 1-95250, $1 and S.A.S.E. per copy; volume discounts).
PUB TYPE	Information Analyses (070) -- Collected Works - Serials (022)
JOURNAL CIT	Inforbrief; Mar 96
EDRS PRICE	MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS	*Academic Achievement; *Bilingual Education; Educational Policy; *Limited English Speaking; Native Language Instruction; *Policy Formation; *Public Policy; Second Language Instruction
IDENTIFIERS	*Content Area Teaching

ABSTRACT

A discussion of public policy concerning bilingual education looks at why and how policy should be re-focused on helping Limited English Proficient (LEP) students make academic gains. It first examines some characteristics of the highly diverse and rapidly growing LEP population, including varied academic background, tendency to reside in small enclaves, and need for native language support. Some trends and issues in the education of this group are then noted: increased development of content area programs combined with English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) instruction and native language instruction; shortage of qualified teachers and professional development opportunities; high student mobility; costs; and political concerns, including lack of documentation of immigrants. The history of bilingual education is chronicled briefly, and implications of the increasingly multilingual nature of the LEP population are discussed. The role of research in informing policy is also considered. It is concluded that policy needs to be re-formed to emphasize LEP student achievement. (Contains 21 references and a list of bilingual education resources.) (MSE)

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Infobrief
March 1996

Focusing Policy on Student Achievement

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INFOBRIEF

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FOCUSING POLICY ON STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

by Joan Montgomery Halford

From classrooms to Congress, bilingual education has become a political, social, and educational lightning rod in the United States. Questions about bilingual instruction spark difficult debates:

- How will limited-English-proficient (LEP) students acquire English without falling behind in their academic work?
- How much, if any, native-language development do these students need—and how should it be delivered?
- Do LEP students have access to equitable academic opportunities?
- Are bilingual education programs a form of separatism, or do they ultimately accelerate social integration?

Policymakers must understand how the decisions they make affect the answers to such questions. In a murky education climate, one reality is clear: Today's language-minority students will help shape tomorrow's nation.

Beneath the increasingly volatile bilingual education debate lies some common ground. Legislators, teachers, students, and parents agree on the need for all students to acquire the English skills necessary for academic success and eventual economic security. Most families of LEP children and the educators who work with them view learning English as the gateway to academic achievement, social acceptance, and economic prosperity. All curricular approaches to bilingual education emphasize the acquisition of academic and social English as a primary goal. Stakeholders agree about the importance of English proficiency, but have differing views about how to achieve that aim and about the relative importance of related objectives—including the provision of academic instruction while students are learning English, and the continued development of students' competence in their native languages.

Controversy and Conflict

Political discourse about bilingual education has intensified as the number of LEP students has risen in U.S. schools. Although official estimates vary, there are 10 million school-aged children in the United States whose first language is other than English (Waggoner 1995) and more than 2.7 million students with limited proficiency in English. Between 1985 and 1994, the number of LEP students in schools increased by 10 percent per year—making them the fastest growing segment of the U.S. student population. California, Texas, and New York have the largest number of LEP students, but nearly all states are experiencing an LEP population increase (Donly, Henderson, and Strang 1995).

Today's LEP students arrive at school with diverse backgrounds, talents, and needs. Although nearly three out of four LEP students in the United States speak Spanish, language-minority students represent more than 150 home languages and cultures. Some of these students were brought to the country by undocumented adults; but many, such as those from Puerto

EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE: BILINGUAL EDUCATION PROGRAM MODELS

Research on the academic achievement of limited-English-proficient students points to bilingual education program models including full development of first and second languages. Programs with the same label may vary markedly, complicating policy discussions. The following are broad programmatic categories:

- ***Submersion*** approaches involve no program or adapted services for LEP students whatsoever. Commonly called "sink-or-swim," submersion is sometimes confused with immersion. When LEP students are linguistically submersed, they face incomprehensible instruction and no first-language support.
- Within the ***immersion*** category of approaches, students are taught a second language through subject matter in that language, with lessons tailored to the learners' linguistic level. In true immersion programs, the goal is for students to become bilingual and biliterate. The teacher is bilingual in the first and second language of the students, and the students receive daily academic instruction in both languages. Immersion program forms include maintenance (or developmental), enrichment, and two-way developmental approaches.
- ***Maintenance*** (or developmental) immersion programs provide long- term native-language and English-language development for LEP students. ***Enrichment*** immersion programs are maintenance programs serving native-English speakers.
- About 180 school systems, recognizing the linguistic resources that LEP students bring to the classroom, have implemented ***two- way developmental*** program models (NCBE 1995), which are a form of immersion. In two-way developmental bilingual programs, native-English-speaking students learn side-by-side with LEP students. Half the academic instruction is in English, and half is in another language (often Spanish). This program model develops bilingualism and cooperation between LEP students and native English speakers.
- Although ***transitional bilingual education*** programs initially furnish first-language academic instruction for LEP students, that support diminishes as students acquire English. In transitional programs, LEP students have greater success than do students who receive no home-language support (Lessow-Hurley 1991), but such programs do not deliver the academic and social advantages of fully developed bilingualism.
- A feature of the English or second-language instruction of nearly all bilingual programs is its adaptation to the level of the students. In many school districts, including schools with students from extremely diverse language backgrounds, LEP students participate solely in ***English-as-a-second-language*** (ESL) programs.
- One increasingly popular option is ***content-based ESL***, which encourages the mastery of academic content while students are acquiring English. A science teacher and an ESL teacher, for example, might co-teach a science course that focuses on science concepts, but involves English specially adapted for the LEP students. Because of tight school budgets, however, content-based ESL instruction in some schools is taught by only one teacher—who may or may not be certified in both ESL and the designated subject area.

Rico, are U.S. citizens. Their academic histories differ markedly. War, poverty, and family responsibilities have disrupted or precluded the schooling of some students, whereas others have previously attended elite private schools in their original countries.

Despite the diverse backgrounds of LEP students, the tendency of language-minority groups to reside in small enclaves creates pockets of similarity. Although large districts may include students from many language backgrounds, most individual schools within a district are somewhat linguistically homogeneous. Denver, for example, serves students from 60 language groups, but no more than 3 languages are present in a given school (Lopez 1995).

Schools respond to the needs of LEP students in various ways. Although almost three-quarters receive English-as-a-second-language (ESL) instruction, for only about one in four is it paired with native-language academic instruction. For nearly half of LEP students, schools employ ESL without native-language support (Lopez 1995). Many schools barely address students' language needs. According to the U.S. Department of Education (Moss and Puma 1995), nearly 30 percent of LEP students attend school without any curriculum adapted to their linguistic requirements. Misunderstandings about LEP students and language acquisition have resulted in reduced academic opportunities, inappropriate identification for special education services, limited access to educational technology, underrepresentation in programs for the gifted, assignment to lower academic tracks, and disproportionately low levels of achievement.

In some cases, schools are now trying to redress past failures with a broad range of programs integrating ESL and native-language instruction with academic content. Implemented under various names, these approaches include immersion programs, two-way developmental programs, and transitional bilingual education. (See adjacent section on Bilingual Education Program Models.)

Policy decisions about bilingual education are complicated by the reality that practice rarely matches educational theory. The effectiveness of bilingual education approaches is influenced by the availability of qualified staff, the use of appropriate assessment techniques, integration with other social and academic school programs, and long-term administrative and public support. Many school districts that commit to bilingual education grapple with the severe national shortage of qualified teachers (NABE 1992). Inadequate professional development for teachers and administrators compounds the impact of the bilingual teacher shortage.

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Beyond staffing difficulties, other serious factors affect classroom realities. The families of some LEP students move frequently, for example, rendering educational continuity difficult. Further, many schools serving LEP students must deal with other complex problems, such as poverty and school violence. In such circumstances, administrators must make financial and educational compromises, doing the best they can with what they have. Finally, tangible short-term program results are rare; like first-language development, second-language development is a long-term process.

One issue of great concern to policymakers is the cost of bilingual education. Some organizations have arrived at misleading estimates by multiplying the number of LEP students by the average cost per pupil nationwide. The resultant $8 to $11 billion figure approximates the full cost of educating LEP students—regardless of curricular approach—but not the cost of bilingual education. The true cost of bilingual education includes the additional funds necessary to change a monolingual program to a bilingual program: special materials; professional development; teacher recruitment; and, in some cases, additional staffing because of smaller classes.

Beyond the curricular and financial concerns associated with bilingual education, political issues loom large. Though most LEP students are legal citizens or residents, some are not. Some people believe that providing education and social services for illegal immigrants encourages illegal entry. Denying a public education to undocumented children, they argue, will decrease the stream of illegal immigrants—an opinion underscored by the passage of California's Proposition 187 legislation in 1994. Some educators and other observers argue, on the other hand, that just as physicians are ethically bound to serve all patients, teachers must provide a high-quality education to all students, regardless of their residency status. A RAND study on educating immigrant youth (McDonnell and Hill 1993) emphasizes this view:

> Whatever one thinks about the need for new immigration laws or stricter enforcement of existing ones, that dispute is distinct from the education of children already living in the United States. The humane reason is that these are innocent children who are in this country because of adult actions over which they have little control. . . . The utilitarian reason is that these children are literally the nation's future.

Historical Perspectives

Though some policymakers approach bilingual education as a new phenomenon, it is not. (See the accompanying timeline.) Bilingual school programs predate the U.S. Constitution. Native Americans acquired European languages, and diverse European settlers maintained their primary languages, in bilingual schools. Bilingual programs flourished well into the 20th century (Crawford 1989). In the 1880s, for example, 52 of the 57 public schools in St. Louis had German/English bilingual programs; native English speakers learned German, and native German speakers learned English (Lessow-Hurley 1991).

In school systems without such programs, though, language-minority students entered schools to sink or swim in an English-only environment. Contrary to popular myth, the submersion experiences of immigrants at the turn of the century were not generally academically successful. In 1908,

VOICES FROM THE SCHOOLS

Emily Palacio, Director of Curriculum Development, Calexico, California Unified School District, cited in *Possible Lives: The Promise of Public Education in America* (Rose 1995)

> When we got our first bilingual ed money, I wasn't sure it would work. There was resistance from some of the Mexican parents too—it's really important to them that their kids learn English—and, well, I was skeptical. . . . But then I started reading some research that impressed me, and I looked closely at our kids who were being taught to read in Spanish—and paradoxically they were learning English better than those we moved into English early.

Anita Scovanner Ramsey, parent of Elena Ramsey, a 7-year-old native English speaker in the Spanish/ English bilingual immersion program at Rolling Terrace Elementary School, Takoma Park, Maryland

> The program has broadened Elena's cultural horizons while emphasizing academics. Elena converses in Spanish and English, reads well in both, and is perfectly comfortable in another culture. I think that's important, because she doesn't see Hispanic culture as foreign. She has important friendships with native Spanish speakers and native English speakers. And her teachers have been implementing cutting-edge instruction. At seven, she has learned long division—in Spanish. I think this bilingual education option should be available to students across the country.

only 13 percent of language-minority students enrolled in New York City schools at age 12 stayed to receive a high school diploma (Crawford 1989). A rising tide of anti-immigrant sentiment and the nationalism of World War I brought an end to many bilingual education programs. Not until the 1960s did bilingual education again emerge in response to an increasing awareness of the unmet academic needs of LEP students.

Approaching Multilingualism?

In the 1990s, contradictions characterize U.S. attitudes toward multilingualism and bilingual education. Many view the acquisition of certain languages (e.g., French and Japanese) as an elite pursuit worthy of the brightest students; but other languages, especially Spanish, are seen as less prestigious. Languages spoken by huge numbers of people—Chinese and Russian, for example—are regarded as relatively obscure novelties. Many people in the United States believe the best way to solve the language problem is for everyone in the world to learn English—and to some extent that is happening. But because people everywhere treasure their cultural identity, language differences will almost certainly continue to persist.

The tensions and value conflicts that surround language instruction and multilingualism lead to curious paradoxes that challenge the formation of basic public policy. For example, while nearly everybody in the United States considers the study of English by students born in this country, who have spoken English all their lives, to be the essence of basic education, many see no need to provide comparable first-language instruction to language-minority students.

At the federal level, legislative initiatives regarding English as the official common language, known as Official English, reflect concern about linguistic and social divisions in the United States. The same issue was debated by the framers of the U.S. Constitution, who chose not to declare an official language out of regard for individual liberties. The groups supporting Official English today include an organization called "U.S. English," an offshoot of the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR), which advocates tighter restrictions on immigration (Crawford 1989). Opponents of the Official English movement, on the other hand, say the proposed legislation is unnecessary, diverts attention from more pressing issues, and could be a portal to more linguistically restrictive measures.

Although some people in the United States are skeptical of multilingualism—or opposed to it—many other people favor this approach. Among nonnative speakers of English, for example, home languages are a critical link to ethnic identity. Perhaps even more important, today's global travel and communication make knowledge of other languages essential. As NABE (1992) observes:

> The U.S. is now inextricably linked to economic, social, and political events around the world. Consequently, the goal of a literate citizenry cannot be limited to English. American literacy must extend to languages other than English.

A major influence on language whose eventual impact is not yet predictable is electronic technology, which has hastened the spread of English as a lingua franca worldwide. The rapid growth in the use of the Internet and other communication technologies encourages people everywhere to use English, yet also furnishes new opportunities for speakers of English to communicate in other languages. How these conflicting possibilities will affect language use and language instruction in the future remains to be seen.

BILINGUAL EDUCATION IN THE UNITED STATES: A POLITICAL AND CURRICULAR TIMELINE

The political and curricular history of bilingual education reflects broader social and economic struggles in the United States:

1500s–1919: As Europeans formed colonies, Native Americans from numerous language backgrounds acquired European languages. During periods of large-scale immigration, bilingual/bicultural community schools proliferated, teaching students in English and other European languages.

1919–1950s: In a period of *intense nationalism*, U.S. education turned away from instruction in languages other than English. German/English bilingual programs, for example, were particularly hard hit as a result of World War I.

INTERNATIONAL APPROACHES TO EDUCATING LANGUAGE MINORITIES

Worldwide, monolingualism is not necessarily the norm. In less-developed countries, for example, nonliterate people often speak multiple languages. Around the globe, nations struggle with unprecedented language-minority populations, often groups forming the low-wage sector of an industrial work force. Some researchers believe U.S. policymakers stand to learn from international approaches to bilingual education (see, e.g., Glenn 1992). Responses to educating language-minority students vary tremendously:

Canada: The source of significant bilingual education research, Canada has implemented bilingual immersion programs on a large scale. In a nation with two official languages, native English- and French-speaking Canadians have cooperated in bilingual education efforts. The context of bilingual education, which has gained increasing acceptance since the 1960s, has grown politically charged in light of the Quebec separatist movement.

Great Britain: Bilingual education is on the rise in the United Kingdom, particularly in linguistically diverse urban and industrial areas. Some British teacher training programs now include coursework to prepare bilingual educators (Stein 1986). According to the British government (British Foreign and Commonwealth Office 1993) "Provision is also increasingly being made for the support of mother-tongue teaching in schools, especially in the early primary years, as a means of ensuring access to the curriculum and facilitating the acquisition of English."

Israel: In a nation where public schools teach only in Hebrew, publicly funded bilingual education barely exists. Students who do not speak Hebrew enter special programs to learn Hebrew language and culture; older students might attend an *ulpan*, or special newcomers' school, before transitioning to a regular public school (Dorit Eldan, Embassy of Israel, Washington, D.C., personal communication, December 1995).

South Africa: The language clause in the Constitution of South Africa, an emerging democracy that has adopted 11 official languages, states that "every person shall be entitled to instruction in the language of his or her choice where this is reasonably practicable." (Department of National Education 1995). The instructional implications of this language clause are rapidly evolving.

Informing Policy with Research

Policy regarding bilingual education should clearly be consistent with professional knowledge drawn from research on language development. What was a barren research field two decades ago is now characterized by many sound, replicated studies. The following are key findings:

- Students' development of thinking skills and academic concepts in their first language has an extremely important positive effect on their second-language learning (see Collier 1995 for a list of research studies).
- Although students of all backgrounds may rapidly acquire the skills for basic communication in English, they need five to seven years to acquire the more cognitively demanding English necessary for academic success (Collier and Thomas 1987). Language proficiency involves reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Students may seem fluent in one language skill area, but may need years to develop

1963: The first large-scale bilingual education program since World War II was initiated at Coral Way School in Dade County, Florida.

1968: *Title VII, the Bilingual Education Act, of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)*, signed by President Johnson, furnished education funding for LEP students. The law, which was specified for students who are "educationally disadvantaged because of their inability to speak English," did not require schools to use a non-English language. Since 1968, the Bilingual Education Act has been repeatedly reauthorized with amendments.

1970s: State-level legal support for bilingual education emerged. Ronald Reagan, for example, as governor of California, ushered passage of the state's first bilingual education law. In 1971, Massachusetts passed the *Transitional Bilingual Education Act*, which requires transitional bilingual education in school districts with 20 or more students from the same primary language background. Other states followed.

POLICY QUESTIONS

- How will schools enable limited-English-proficient (LEP) students to acquire English without falling behind in their academic work?
- Should schools provide first-language instruction for LEP students?
- How will decision makers ensure that LEP students receive the same academic opportunities as other students?
- What role can state and local policy play in reducing the shortage of certified bilingual education teachers?
- How can policy enable all students to benefit from the linguistic resources of LEP students?
- What can decision makers learn from multilingual education in other nations?

full proficiency in another. Long-term academic success requires a long-term programmatic commitment.

- Students who acquire English and continue to develop their first language have higher academic achievement in later years than do students who acquire English at the expense of their primary tongue (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development [ASCD] 1987).
- Students who acquire English, but do not maintain their first language, perform less well than do students who continue developing their first language (Lessow-Hurley 1991). Also, proficiency in more than one language actually enhances thinking (Hakuta 1986).

Program Research

In an arena where decision makers may be pressured to base conclusions on ideology, research on the effectiveness of bilingual education programs attracts controversy. Protracted arguments may result from even small-scale studies. Beyond politics, program researchers must overcome complex obstacles to designing accurate research. For example, researchers may draw faulty conclusions if a program to be evaluated is labeled as bilingual simply because it serves language-minority students—and not because it provides first-language instruction (Willig and Ramirez 1993).

In general, research on bilingual education programs echoes language-acquisition research, supporting long-term first-language development for LEP students while they acquire academic English. A major, federally funded, longitudinal study of three approaches to bilingual education (Ramirez, Yuen, Ramey, and Pasta 1991), known as the Ramirez study, found that late-exit bilingual programs yielded greater academic achievement than did early-exit bilingual or English-immersion approaches. The National Research Council's Panel to Review Evaluation Studies of Bilingual Education (Meyer and Fienberg 1992), though questioning some methodological aspects of the Ramirez study, agreed that the findings "support the theory underlying native-language instruction in bilingual education."

Toward Student-Centered Policy

Because LEP students constitute an increasing segment of the school-age population, their educational achievement demands greater long-range policy attention. To frame the education of these students exclusively in terms of their educational needs ignores the potential richness they bring to schools. Through

1974: The U.S. Supreme court ruling in *Lau v. Nichols*, based on Title VI of the Civil Rights Act, found that "there is no equality of treatment merely by providing students with the same facilities, textbooks, teachers, and curriculum; for students who do not understand English are effectively foreclosed from any meaningful education." The court did not urge specific remedies.

1974: Passage of the *Equal Educational Opportunities Act*. The act, which still furnishes the strongest federal protection for the educational rights of LEP students, states: "*No state shall deny equal educational opportunity to an individual on account of his or her race, color, sex, or national origin by . . . (f) the failure by an educational agency to take appropriate steps to overcome language barriers that impede equal participation by its students in its instructional programs.*"

1975: The *Lau remedies* issued by the Commission on Education went beyond the U.S. Supreme Court decision to mandate bilingual education. The remedies were not equivalent to federal regulations.

their linguistic and cultural vantage points. LEP students can infuse schools with new ways of learning.

Disentangled from political and social debates, bilingual education is about children—learners with real dreams and real needs. The opportunity exists for policymakers to refocus the bilingual education debate to emphasize LEP student achievement. The challenge is to create learning environments where linguistic diversity becomes educational synergy.

ASCD AND BILINGUAL EDUCATION

As an international, nonprofit, nonpartisan education organization committed to the success of all learners, the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) celebrates diversity as a means to enrich the academic achievement of all students. Based on the need for an educated citizenry, on professional knowledge about language learning, and on our belief in fairness, ASCD recommends that, where justified by the number of LEP students who speak a given language, policymakers support bilingual education programs that:

- are designed to develop competence in English to the level required for future academic success;
- provide essential academic instruction in the students' native language until they are linguistically qualified to learn similar content in English; and
- help students develop and maintain fluency in their native language.

To implement this recommendation, policymakers may need to act on numerous related policy issues. Depending on their role, they may need to deal with questions involving choice among particular program models; qualifications of teachers; or funding for materials, professional development, or smaller classes. Such issues can be resolved more readily, however, in the context of a clear understanding of what bilingual education is and is not, and a commitment to its true goals.

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1980: With the creation of the U.S. Department of Education, the Office of Bilingual Education was expanded to the Office of Bilingual Education and Minority Language Affairs (*OBEMLA*).

1982: In *Plyler v. Doe*, the U.S. Supreme Court denied the states' right to exclude the children of illegal immigrants from public schools.

1994: California voters approved *Proposition 187*, which called for the denial of public K–12 education to undocumented children, many of whom are limited in English proficiency.

1995: A House subcommittee of the U.S. Congress conducted hearings of proposals to make English the official common language of the U.S.

A federal judge in California struck down the portion of Proposition 187 addressing public K–12 education.

Federal budget initiatives would severely cut education funding, including monies for bilingual education.

1996: Bilingual education continues to generate debate at the local, state, and federal levels.

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- Bilingual Education Resources on the Net: http://www.estrellita.com/karenm/bil.html1/
- NCBE World Wide Web Site: http://www.ncbe.gwu.edu/
- University of California Linguistic Minority Research Institute: http://lmrinet.gse.ucsb.edu/

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